

The Stink of the Sacred: a Bataillean reading of Gainsbourg's film *Je t'aime moi non plus*

Abstract

Although best known for his music, Serge Gainsbourg also starred in and directed several films. This article considers his directorial debut, *Je t'aime moi non plus* (1976) through the optic of Georges Bataille's theorisation of the sacred and the heterogeneous. According to Bataille, bourgeois capitalism is characterised by material and moral values, respect for work, and homogeneity. Against this he posits the outsider values of the sacred. Where capitalism is predicated on production and accumulation, the heterogeneous is defined by unproductive expenditure, such as sexual play, art, and sacrifice. These values are applied to Gainsbourg's image, his alter ego 'Gainsbarre', and his artistic output, before focusing on the 1976 film. Conclusions are made regarding the film, plus Gainsbourg's status as an exemplar of Bataillean values, celebrated in his fans' curation of his memory on youtube.

Key words

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Introduction: Gainsbourg, Gainsbarre, and consumption of the self

In 1979 Serge Gainsbourg released a song called 'Aux armes etcaetera', a laconic reggae version of *La Marseillaise*. Reactionary bodies including sections of the French army plus much of the right-wing press, were furious. Michel Droit, writing in *Le Figaro* magazine, mobilised a series of tropes evoking bodily fluids and waste in his attack on this 'profanation': 'Gainsbourg vomit, il bave, "oeil chassieux, [...] lippe dégoulinante [...]." Il pollue, et Michel Droit compare la pollution qui émane de lui à celle "de certains tuyaux d'échappement."' [Gainsbourg vomits, he slobbers, with 'a rheumy eye, a dribbling bottom lip'. He's toxic, and Michel Droit compares this toxic pollution to an exhaust pipe] (Francfort 2007: 33). This was not just an attack on Gainsbourg's (ethnically coded) choice of musical style for the reworking, and hence on his supposed lack of patriotism. It was also an unwitting characterisation of the self-parodic alter ego that Gainsbourg himself was on the point of establishing at the turn of the decade, and which would come to dominate his public image in the eighties: Gainsbarre. As he was to explain on the 1981 song 'Ecce homo', 'Eh ouais c'est moi Gainsbarre / On me trouve au hasard / Dans des night-clubs et des bars' [Oh yeah, I'm Gainsbarre / You can find me hanging out / In night-clubs and bars]. The lyrics went on to list such characteristics as a three-day beard, a cigar and a broken heart. Associated with addictions to alcohol and smoking, showcased by the gleeful media, but abandoned by his wife the actress Jane Birkin, Gainsbarre was loud, louche and lewd. Mister Hyde to Gainsbourg's Dr Jekyll, he was 'un double monstrueux devenu une sorte d'ennemi public numéro un' [a monstrous double, a kind of public enemy number one] (Francfort 2007: 27). Gainsbourg's posthumous rehabilitation, led by Birkin herself, has helped to expunge Gainsbarre from public memory, replacing his controversial antics with a nostalgic celebration of Gainsbourg's song-writing talents. Thus, his songs have been showcased at the mainstream charity concerts *Les Enfoirés*, including a performance of 'Aux armes etcaetera' in 1999, a year after France won the football World Cup, in a celebration of supposed national unity and multi-racial harmony (see Tinker 2015). In this way, in the years after his death in 1991, Gainsbourg's memory has been, perhaps surprisingly, mobilised in the creation of 'shared emotional experiences' between celebrity performers and mainstream spectators, and in the construction of 'unity and consensus' (Tinker 2015: 347, 350).

It is not the unifying figure of the posthumous Gainsbourg (songwriter rather than performer) that will be the focus of this article. Rather, the grotesque, controversial and challenging figure of Gainsbarre, and the debut film Gainsbourg directed, will be explored with reference to the theories of Georges Bataille. In Batailleian terms, this article concerns the *heterogeneous* power of Gainsbourg (excessive, excluded, effervescent) rather than the unifying, consensual, *homogeneous* figure that he seems to have become since his death, as Tinker (2015) has indicated. Moreover, the duality established via Gainsbourg-as-Gainsbarre, as we shall see, recalls what Bataille calls 'the duality of sacred forms' which can combine the lowest with the most exalted values (Bataille 1979: 72). This is well exemplified by Gainsbourg's 1980 novel *Evguénie Sokolov*, which celebrates the dynamically creative

and the repulsively scatological at one and the same time in the figure of a prolific painter whose work consists of ‘gazogrammes,’ images whose lines are dictated by explosions of flatulence. Sokolov’s ultimate work is a series of abstract self-portraits made with the imprint of his bleeding anus, and known by his art dealer as ‘étoiles de merde’ [stars of shit] (Gainsbourg 1980: 102). As is well known, in the years following *Evguénie Sokolov* and ‘Aux armes etcaetera’ Gainsbourg-as-Gainsbarre went on to behave outrageously on French television throughout the last decade of his life, whether declaring on a chat show in front of a shocked Whitney Houston ‘I want to fuck her’, or setting fire to a 500-franc note. The latter event will be useful here in establishing a resonance between Gainsbourg’s actions and the writings of Bataille. Indeed, the defiantly self-destructive urges displayed by Gainsbourg-as-Gainsbarre embody perfectly Bataille’s contention that ‘it is human to burn and consume oneself’ and to ‘live like a flame’ (Bataille 1985: 231). The connection between Gainsbourg and Bataille will be explored below more thoroughly via an analysis of the former’s 1976 film *Je t’aime moi non plus*, but it will initially be sketched with regard to the theme of money.

Gainsbourg’s attitude to money is succinctly and evocatively expressed by one of the many fan sites devoted to him: ‘il le chie, le flambe, le dépense’ [he shits money, he burns it, he spends it] (Anon 2017). The association of wealth with waste, the disregard for its accumulation, and the flamboyant destruction of its symbols, ties Gainsbourg closely to Bataille’s delight in unproductive expenditure (see Bataille 1985). The fact that burning bank notes, as he did on television in the mid-eighties, was illegal, only adds to the Bataillean sense of Gainsbourg’s literally criminal rejection of bourgeois material values. As we read in *Literature and Evil*, ‘Care of the future is the exaltation of avarice; it condemns improvidence, which squanders. Provident weakness opposes the principle of enjoying the present moment. [...] Avaricious morality is the basis of justice and the police’ (Bataille 1990: 144). The question of how moral and material values are interlinked in bourgeois capitalism is explored at greater length in Bataille’s 1933 essay ‘The Notion of Expenditure’. Here we read that the dominant conception of ‘material utility’, with its focus on ‘production and conservation’, is a ‘flat and untenable conception of existence’ (Bataille 1985: 116, 117). Against this, Bataille posits the importance of ‘*unproductive expenditure*’, which is characterised not by any promise of future gain (speculating to accumulate) but by the basic human need to lose. For Bataille, bourgeois capitalism has obscured from view the salient fact that from the earliest societies, ‘sacred things’ have always been ‘constituted by an operation of loss’ (Bataille 1985: 119). This is apparent in such activities of ‘ostentatious loss’ as mourning, war, the building of vast monuments, and in quasi-sacrificial religious myths such as the crucifixion, or in ancient practices such as the extravagant and ultimately self-destructive gift-giving cycle known as *potlatch*. In the pre-capitalist world, wealth is undoubtedly power, but it is the ‘power to lose’ (Bataille 1985: 122). Hence the spectacular destruction of one’s own wealth—as in the rite of *potlatch* studied by Marcel Mauss—is the prerogative of the rich, but also an acknowledgement of a deep-seated psychological need felt by all humans—the need to lose. Taken this way, Gainsbourg’s burning of a 500-franc note is not a meaningless or gratuitous gesture but a *potlatch*-style means of ‘stunning and humiliating’ his enemies (Bataille 1985: 122)—in this case, French bourgeois taste-makers including TV presenters and producers—via the deliberate and defiant sacrifice of his own wealth. That such an act should be illegal only reveals how threatening it is to the very logic of bourgeois morality, since ‘The hatred of expenditure is the *raison d’être* of and the

justification for the bourgeoisie', whose historical emergence was associated with an attack on 'the prodigality of feudal society' (Bataille 1985: 124-5). In addition, and more germane to the film *Je t'aime moi non plus*, self-serving practices like non-reproductive sex, or other forms of play, are described by Bataille as '*states of excitation*' and defined as arising from 'the illogical and irresistible impulse' to reject moralistic and materialistic concerns (Bataille 1985: 128, italics in original). It is this powerful impulse that drives Gainsbourg's creativity, his public persona, and his filmmaking.

The film in its context

While *Je t'aime moi non plus* marked, in 1976, Gainsbourg's debut as a film director, he had already scored and also starred in several French films of the late sixties and early seventies, including Pierre Koralnik's gangster thriller *Cannabis* (1970). It is instructive to consider Gainsbourg's presence in *Cannabis* as an example of his early on-screen persona and also as an instance of the type of cinema with which he was associated before *Je t'aime moi non plus*. Most importantly, a film like *Cannabis* places in relief the radical, challenging nature of Gainsbourg's first film as director. Despite the air of counter-cultural rebellion that percolates *Cannabis*, primarily through its drug-focused subject matter but also through its representation of the police, the film is largely conventional, especially for the early seventies in France, informed as they were by the anti-authoritarian socio-cultural rebellion of May 1968. The representation of sex and drug-taking is very frequent and mildly explicit, while adding very little indeed to the narrative of the film. Viewed retrospectively, it looks like a form of window-dressing or local colour for a plot concerning the turf war between gangsters. The sex scenes—mainly featuring Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin—are resolutely heterosexual and stylistically unremarkable. Close-ups focus rarely on Gainsbourg but repeatedly on Birkin's face, mouth, and breasts. Her character (Jane) has nothing of the androgyny that Birkin portrays in *Je t'aime moi non plus*. Jane represents a reassuring and passive glamour, and is seen throughout with long hair, make-up, elegant skirts, thigh-high boots, and mini-dresses—when she is not naked. Gainsbourg himself, playing a gangster called Serge, is the hero of the piece. The few troubling elements of the film are associated with his character, such as the first scene and the opening credits, where he is shown repeatedly stealing from the dead. But the corpses he robs are young and beautiful, part of a glamourised criminal underworld, where Serge's nonchalant gangster fits perfectly. For the first few scenes of the film he is never seen without his fur coat. There is nothing grotesque or excessive about him, unlike the various male characters in *Je t'aime moi non plus* who function as alter egos in the absence of Gainsbourg himself from that film (see below).

The excesses courted in his later media appearances, and embraced in his 1976 album *L'Homme à tête de chou*, with its tales of sexual obsession and murder, are nowhere to be seen in *Cannabis*. The opening lines of that album declare with a triumphant self-disgust, 'Je suis l'homme à tête de chou, moitié légume, moitié mec' [I am cabbage-head, half man half vegetable], while the song 'Aéroplanes' describes the singer as Cheetah the Chimp, confronted by the body-beautiful in the form of Tarzan and Jane. In *Cannabis*, by contrast, Serge's appearance and behaviour are never belittled or ridiculed. He is portrayed in a series of masterful poses, often smoking, casually carrying a revolver or a machine gun, dressed in a fur coat or a mac. Although he is shown sweating profusely in one sequence early in the

film, this is the result of a bullet-wound sustained in a gunfight with rival gangsters. The scene is thus narratively determined, codified as a heroic form of suffering, and also limited in duration. Most tellingly perhaps, the use of Gainsbourg's own score emphasises the heroism of his protagonist. There is none of the ironic or contrapuntal use of music that features in *Je t'aime moi non plus* (discussed below). Here, Gainsbourg's score is heroic and tragic, never undercutting the images. The opening title theme is a piece of conventional early seventies rock. Later, when a badly wounded Serge is driving into Paris to seek sanctuary, a melodramatic instrumental is heard, heavy with strings, evoking fears of the hero's death. All the same, *Cannabis* makes one or two hints at Gainsbourg's outsider persona, especially in the exposition sequence in New York, where his boss tells Serge that the mafia dislike him because he is a Russian Jew, and jokingly calls him 'espèce de cochon russe' [dirty Russian pig]. The outsider role is however a staple of the gangster genre—both in its classic 1930s Hollywood version and in various more recent iterations, including numerous 1970s examples from both sides of the Atlantic—and is not developed with the Bataillean intensity of Gainsbourg's startling 1976 movie. The only real twist on gangster conventions in *Cannabis* comes in the finale, when Serge is betrayed not by the gangster's moll/femme fatale (Jane) but by his jealous partner in crime, Paul (Paul Nicholas). This hints at Paul's homosocial fascination with Serge, but at the same time serves to reinforce the romantic strand in the film, and to place the heterosexual couple (Serge and Jane)—soon to be a celebrity couple—at its heart. The film ends with Serge, shot by Paul, dying cradled in Jane's arms. As an image of suffering and loss, it is reminiscent of a *pieta*, and emblematic of the tragic mode which operates throughout the film. The only element in *Cannabis* that will recur in the 1976 film is Birkin's harsh screaming, the final sound of the former movie as the screen fades to black.

Je t'aime moi non plus confusingly shares its title with Gainsbourg's infamous late sixties song of sexual pleasure, recorded as a duet first with Brigitte Bardot and then with Jane Birkin. The song is heard in various iterations throughout the film, in which Birkin herself—but not Gainsbourg—also stars. If seeking a version of Gainsbourg in the film then one could consider Boris (René Kolldehoff), the flatulent, sweaty café owner, to be an incarnation of Gainsbarre *avant la lettre*. The action is set in an unspecified location, with trappings of the American mid-west in the form of roller derbies, truck stops, and motels. (Gainsbourg dedicates the film to Boris Vian, the creator of another brutal, imaginary America in his hard-boiled Vernon Sullivan novels.) The protagonist, Krassky (Joe Dallesandro) drives a garbage truck with his buddy and occasional lover Padovan (Hugues Quester). When they meet Johnny (Jane Birkin), a boyish androgyne who works as a waitress in a greasy truck stop café, Krassky and Johnny become lovers, to the anger of Padovan. As one of the very few articles on *Je t'aime moi non plus* asserts, 'it remains one of the most critically neglected movies of its era', attracting none of the attention generated by similarly explicit explorations of desire such as *Ai No Corrida* (Oshima, 1969), *Last Tango in Paris* (Bertolucci, 1972) or *Salò* (Pasolini, 1975) (Sargeant 2004). The film has however, become more freely available via its subtitled DVD release by Optimum in 2007, three years after Sargeant described it as 'forgotten and rarely screened' (Sargeant 2004).

One of the more perceptive of the reviews in the French cinema press at the time of the film's release suggested that its antecedents were as much literary as filmic (citing Vian, existentialism, and *Série Noire* crime novels), and noting that the 'retro' stylings were

related to a hyper-real version of the 1950s rather than the 1970s French vogue for stories of the 1940s, known as *la mode rétro* (Legrand 1976: 74). One should however note that Gainsbourg had in fact already engaged with *la mode rétro* and its controversial revisiting of the Vichy years, in his 1975 album *Rock Around the Bunker*. His approach was to critique the trend, maintaining his characteristic focus on sexuality in order to explore Nazi sadomasochism and to question the prevalent 'French fetishisation of the Nazis in the 1970s' (Briggs 2011: 388). Moreover, Gainsbourg's ridiculing of the 'sexual allure' of fascism—an allure prevalent in 1970s European films such as *The Night Porter* (Cavani, 1974) and *Lacombe, Lucien* (Malle, 1974)—was achieved by reference to the unruly body. To this end, the song 'Tata teutonne' makes its Nazi protagonist 'an object of revulsion, as his grotesque body [...] produces flatulence that sounds like a machine gun' (Briggs 2011: 390). As noted by Briggs, such an approach dovetails with Michel Foucault's critique of *mode rétro* cinema for eroticising a Nazi sexual regime which was in fact 'full of "pitiful, pathetic, and puritanical figures"' (Briggs 2011: 391).

Bataille's theory of the heterogeneous

In this connection it is worth noting that Georges Bataille also engaged with fascism, albeit in a much more structured and theorised way than Gainsbourg, in his elucidation of the distinction between homogeneous and heterogeneous elements in society. His essay on 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' establishes a fundamental contrast between 'social homogeneity', characterised above all by production, and heterogeneity, defined as those 'useless', excluded elements that are 'impossible to assimilate' into such a society (Bataille 1979: 65, 67). Bataille asserts that 'the foundation of social homogeneity' is money, since 'Money serves to measure all work' (Bataille 1979: 65). This is what makes Gainsbourg's burning of bank notes such a direct affront to homogeneous society. As for heterogeneous elements, these are excluded from the realm of the homogeneous just as, in Freudian psychoanalysis, unconscious elements are excluded by censorship from the conscious ego (Bataille 1979: 68). Again, Gainsbourg's deliberate celebration of such elements—for instance, parading the primary Freudian taboo in his late song 'Lemon Incest'—cannot be ignored. A prophylactic function is played by social convention, to ensure that the one field is protected from contamination by the other: 'the heterogeneous thing is assumed to be charged with an unknown and dangerous force' and so 'a certain social prohibition of contact (taboo) separates it from the *homogeneous* or ordinary world' (Bataille 1979: 69, italics in original). As for fascism, Bataille is categorical: 'fascist leaders are incontestably part of heterogeneous existence' in contradistinction from 'peaceful but fastidious homogeneity' (Bataille 1979: 70). Fascist action is characterised by the breaking of laws, by an 'affective flow' uniting the leader with their followers, and by 'violent and excessive energies'; but these ultimately create a paradox, a form of 'unity' in which heterogeneous elements are coalesced into a fascist 'authority' which requires that its followers renounce their 'immediate natural needs' (Bataille 1979: 71). In other words, by means of unifying practices such as parades and rallies, the 'infamy' of the heterogeneous fascist followers 'is transformed into its opposite: order and glamor' (Bataille 1979: 78). It is this very transformation which seems to operate in glamorisations of fascism including—according to some readings, such as that of Foucault (1974)—the French *mode rétro*. This glamorisation, as we have seen, is entirely deflated in *Rock Around the Bunker*. But in Bataille, by contrast, the fascist body, far from exhibiting excess or a grotesque lack of control (both genuinely heterogeneous elements), is subject to constraint (thus becoming homogeneous).

Before analysing *Je t'aime moi non plus*, it is helpful to delineate a little further the field of the heterogeneous. According to Bataille, the heterogeneous 'consists of everything rejected by *homogeneous* society as waste', including 'the waste products of the human body and certain analogous matter (trash, vermin, etc.): the parts of the body; persons, words or acts having a suggestive erotic value' (Bataille 1979: 69, italics in original). This is the world of Krassky, Padovan, Johnny and Boris in *Je t'aime moi non plus*. In the film we see, hear and almost smell the trash, the body parts, and the erotic actions that Bataille speaks of. Repeated shots of the giant garbage dump where Krassky and Padovan work are matched with the buzzing of flies on the soundtrack. The sense of decay is palpable. Krassky and later Johnny are shown urinating in the open air. When Krassky and Johnny take time off to lay in the sunshine, a slow track forwards reveals the dump below them. What began as a stereotypical romantic image (young lovers in the grass) is revealed as a merely a surface gloss, beneath which throbs what Krassky describes as a mountain of shit. Associated with dirt by his work and his nickname (*Krass/crasse*), he celebrates the dump. As the camera moves over the panorama of trash, Krassky eulogises it in mythical terms as 'la nausée des villes, la vomissure de l'homme, la source du Styx' [the nausea of the cities, the vomit of mankind, the source of the Styx]. He even explains this classical reference to a mystified Johnny, making explicit Gainsbourg's perception that the atavistic urges of ancient myth still flow through the modern world. Similarly, for Bataille the 'violent dynamism' of myth is to be found in 'the darkness of the sacred place' (Bataille 1985: 232). His essay 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' mourns the absence of myth in modern capitalist society, and seeks, through a reconnection with myth, a 'return to lost totality' (Bataille 1985: 233). For Bataille, 'the old house of myth' seems ruined and deserted, but can be reactivated by the same sacred delirium 'that engenders the images of art', rejecting the puny, functional use-value of reason, science, and 'the homogeneous world of practical life' (Bataille 1985: 232, 80).

Film analysis

If it risks exaggeration to suggest that Gainsbourg was a figure of Bataillean myth (if for no other reason than that Bataille saw myth as powerful but *hidden*, working through secret societies and cults, not through media spectacle and celebrity), certainly at the very least he and Bataille share an intense awareness of what the latter calls 'the attraction of the most repulsive objects' (Bataille 1985: 80). These objects, characteristically, are intimately connected with the body. And as *Positif* noted on the film's release, Gainsbourg consistently employs, not the classic French auteur cinema's fascination with language as a vehicle for psychological realism, but a decidedly original resort to non-verbal, corporeal elements such as gestures, silences, screams, and the rubbing together of naked bodies (Legrand 1976). The consumption of food and drink adds to the catalogue of heterogeneous bodily matter in *Je t'aime moi non plus*. Examples include Padovan in a filthy flat, eating spaghetti from a saucepan while the camera picks out the mould on the walls, and later, Krassky eating his own ear wax. The champagne that Boris drinks straight from the bottle is no signifier of refinement or wealth, but simply a source of repeated flatulence. Nudity is associated not with aesthetic value but with unease and decay. As Bataille states, 'The pleasure of the body is unclean and baleful', while 'nudity is the collapse, even the betrayal, of the aspect of ourselves given to us through our clothes' (Bataille 1994: 186, 203). One scene in the film escapes this perspective to present an undiluted sense of pleasure in the human form. Krassky and Johnny float naked on a pair of giant inflated inner tubes, spinning round slowly

and happily in what amounts to a kind of dance, the camera capturing repeated shots of their bodies, and in particular their buttocks. This is the film's only point of contrast with the Bataillean sense of nudity as 'baleful', a 'collapse' of the clothed self. In a sense, the interlude celebrates the atavistic, prelapsarian body beautiful—like that of Tarzan and Jane from the 1976 song 'Aéroplanes'—while Cheetah the Chimp remains offscreen, having retreated behind the camera. But the rest of the film is almost relentless in its presentation of nudity as unclean and repellent. Several times in the film flies alight on Johnny's naked body, as if to suggest that it is already rotting. Assaulted by Padovan, she is wrapped in a plastic bag and described by her attacker as a supermarket chicken. At a strip show attended by the protagonists, the bodies clumsily displayed are middle-aged, graceless and overweight. The scene is accompanied by a delicate instrumental version of 'Je t'aime moi non plus', whose meaning shifts as the grotesque striptease images are replaced by shots of Johnny and Krassky dancing slow, and then starting to kiss. What began as an ironic mismatch between music and image becomes an idyllic whole, one of the very few moments in the film where traditional romantic values are evoked. This interlude does not last, however. The music is undercut once more as it soundtracks a violent attack on Padovan by a homophobic gang outside the dance hall.

The next iteration of the 'Je t'aime' theme clearly posits the sex between Johnny and Krassky as sacred. The theme is played on a church organ during his first attempt to sodomise her. The religious associations are deliberately interrupted by her screams of pain, but this only adds to the sense that Gainsbourg's version of the sacred here is close to Bataille's—one of 'affective violence' (Bataille 1985: 81). Moreover, this painful, brutal sex is encoded as authentic by contradistinction from the other sexual activity going on in the hotel where the scene takes place. Thrown out of the hotel for making too much noise, Krassky tells the manager that only prostitutes 'fuck in silence', thus placing himself and Johnny outside the business of sex which commodifies desire and empties it of the sacred or the heterogeneous. The final sex scenes between Krassky and Johnny—during which, it is implied, her pain is finally replaced by pleasure—are afforded the full mix of the Gainsbourg / Birkin duet, aurally signifying sexual orgasm. As Sargeant gleefully notes, 'This is a love theme celebrating anal sex in the back of a dump truck' (Sargeant 2004).

Sargeant's focus on anal sex in the film is well justified, and makes brief reference to Bataille's priapic prose poem 'The Solar Anus', but his assertion that Gainsbourg's late sixties hit song of the same name likewise concerns 'an affirmation of heterosexual anal sex' is far from the mark. Here Sargeant is unfortunately dependent on the frequent Anglophone error which mistranslates the lyric *Je vais et je viens entre tes reins* as a bizarre "'coming and going" between the female protagonist's "kidneys" rather than her *loins* (Sargeant 2004). Clearer examples of an anal fixation in Gainsbourg's song-writing are to be found later in his discography, on his 1973 album *Vu de l'extérieur*, including the title track. None the less Sargeant is right to highlight the transgressive nature of the sex enacted in the film itself, since 'Anal sex renounces any pretence of procreation' and—at least before its gradual recuperation by heterosexual porn, largely in the years since Sargeant's article—'it has socio-cultural connotations of male homosexuality, and it is commonly thought of as dirty and faecal' (Sargeant 2004). Once more we are in the realm of Bataille's 'unproductive expenditure'. Although Bataille was resolutely heterosexual in his depiction of sexuality, he was fascinated by what he termed 'the inevitable connection between sexuality and

excretion' (Bataille 1994: 203). In effect, for Bataille both elements are closely connected to expenditure or the gift, and hence stand outside the hegemonic post-feudal value-system built on the logic of accumulation. Regarding sexual desire, he states that 'Desire alone is active, and desire alone makes us live in the present' (Bataille: 1990, 123). Such moments have no sense of duration, only the instant, and so belong to a sacred economy of expenditure rather than to the dominant economy of acquisition. These 'extreme moments of life [...] are defined in terms of a non-meaning' and a subsequent feeling of 'monstrous shame' (Bataille 1994: 190). In the essay 'Happiness, Eroticism, and Literature', Bataille stipulates that 'the sexual act is animality' (Bataille 1994: 187). None the less, he insists, it enraptures us and takes us temporarily out of the sphere of reasonable, productive, everyday behaviour. When the two are compared it becomes blindingly apparent that 'without any doubt, sexuality is a desperate negation of what it is not' (Bataille 1994: 200). This is the intoxicating, illogical, dirty and desperate urge that propels Gainsbourg's protagonists out of the banal world of work and social relations (represented by the café) and into the world of desire. The urge is most explicit in the case of Johnny, but it also underpins the decision of Krassky to abandon both Padovan and the work they share as garbage men.

The film's challenging narrative is deliberately framed by normative constructions of gender and sexuality. The opening images are of hyperbolic gendered iconography: a pneumatic blonde pin-up on the bonnet of a giant hyper-masculine Mack garbage truck. Throughout, Gainsbourg films the truck from unusual angles in order to exaggerate its size, emphasising a sense of hypermasculinity. Moreover, repeated mirror compositions—a stock cinematic device—are used for all of the protagonists, in order to indicate that their sense of identity will be interrogated. In the final scene, Krassky and Johnny, having repeatedly transgressed binary assumptions, are reinserted into what have been called, in another context, the 'repetitive systems of heterosexuality, homosexuality, male, female, and the many other binaries which are the paradigmatic spine of the social corpus' (MacCormack 2008: 3). Thus, when Krassky refuses Johnny's demand to avenge Padovan's sadistic assault on her by beating up his former lover, Johnny redefines herself as a straight woman with the dismissive outburst 'Tu me dégoûtes. Fous le camp! Pédale!' [You disgust me. Fuck off, you queer!]. Krassky and Padovan leave together, the gay male couple reactivated at Johnny's expense. Hence in one reading, the film is particularly of interest to gay male spectators, for whom its 'relaxed depiction of the gay relationship' central to the plot is one of its main pleasures, placing *Je t'aime moi non plus* 'Years—even decades—ahead of its time' (Murray 1998: 420).

Conclusion

The afterlife of Gainsbourg, as we have seen, has involved a recuperation of his image as mainstream, via a celebration of his songs (often now performed by Jane Birkin, the custodian of his memory), with no mention of his antics as Gainsbarre. In Bataillean terms, the heterogeneous has been reworked to homogeneous ends. A similar, though less obvious, fate has befallen the imagery from the film *Je t'aime moi non plus*. Certain iconographic elements such as the giant yellow truck, Krassky's white vests and blue jeans, and to some extent the semi-desolate setting, on the margins of recognisable social space,

recur in Jean-Jacques Beineix's popular melodrama *37.2 le matin* (aka *Betty Blue*, 1986). But here they recur in a homogenised and normalised form, as part of a *cinéma du look* aesthetic that prioritises spectacle while telling a conventional tale of heterosexual sex and doomed love, in a narrative close to the reactionary gender politics of the *récit* form in French literature (see Austin 2008: 64). The strong sexual strand in *37.2 le matin* is even authorised by reference—in the director's cut—to the female protagonist's desire for a baby, which results in her kidnapping a young child. This removes the film entirely from Bataille's heterogeneous field of unproductive expenditure and reinscribes sex into the homogeneous logic of reproduction, a logic entirely absent from *Je t'aime moi non plus*.

However, there is one place where Gainsbourg's essential heterogeneity has been kept alive: the internet, and specifically youtube. Functioning as 'a transient fan archive', youtube is an 'informal' and 'chaotic' means whereby fans can curate and recreate 'star texts' (Thornton 2017: 207, 205). Here, videos of Gainsbourg's televised performances of the eighties abound, embracing both live concerts and chat show appearances. The user comments moreover, at times make explicit the heterogeneous nature of these performances. This is exemplified by a video of his 1985 performance of 'Mickey Maousse / My Lady Heroïne' at the Casino de Paris (Gainsbourg 1985). Introduced sarcastically by a chain-smoking and crumpled Gainsbourg as a 'classy' poem, 'Mickey Maousse' (recorded in 1981 as a reggae song) is a juvenile rhyme about his phallic prowess, reinforced during its performance with a series of explicit hand gestures. After a minute and a half, however, the rhyme segues into a pained, almost despairing rendition of the song 'My Lady Heroïne'. Once again, Gainsbourg matches his gestures to the lyrics, but here he enacts a heroin fix while the song speaks of the power of the drug via references to Sade's works *Justine* and *Les Malheurs de la vertu*. The video performance as a whole lasts less than five minutes but runs a gamut from the smirking braggadocio of the playground to the 'moral isolation' of the lonely Sadeian man (see Bataille 1994: 203). While some fan comments on this video delight in 'GAINSBARRE dans toute sa splendeur' [sic], or declare 'Gainsbarre tu nous manques vraiment', others point out the duality evident in the performance of the rhyme and the song together: 'J'adore cette vidéo : on voit le côté provocateur de Gainsbourg dans Mickey Maousse, mais on voit juste après que ça reste un compositeur de génie' (Gainsbourg 1985).

Gainsbourg is repeatedly described in other youtube comments as 'sacré mec', and for once this everyday expression here evokes the Bataillean sense of the sacred. Gainsbourg's heterogeneous value is thus preserved not through any sanitised mainstream recuperation, but through the very elements that characterised Gainsbarre, including his most priapic performances. Or more accurately, through a merging of his two personae, as the fan cited above so astutely observes: the *provocateur* (Gainsbarre) and the poet (Gainsbourg). It is thus possible to see in the video and comments for 'Mickey Maousse / My Lady Heroïne' an example of what Bataille calls 'the duality of sacred forms' which are 'distributed among two opposing classes: *pure* and *impure*' (Bataille 1979: 72, italics in original). The co-presence of Gainsbourg and Gainsbarre identified by fans in the youtube clip thus demonstrates what Bataille calls the 'identity of opposites [...] between exalted and imperative (higher) forms and impoverished (lower) forms' within the field of the heterogeneous (Bataille 1979: 72). It provides us with a concluding instance of the pure and impure, elevated and wretched Bataillean value of Serge Gainsbourg.

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